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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S LAND FORCES COMMANDER REASSERTS RIGHT OF
THE MILITARY TO DEFEND SECULARISM

Classified By: DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a September 25, 2006 speech to incoming Land Forces cadets, Commander of the Turkish Land Forces Command General Ilker Basbug warned of a growing Islamist threat to Turkey and defended the right of the military to speak out on issues that threaten the unitary and secular nature of the nation-state. Saying that "the reactionary (Islamist) threat is reaching alarming proportions," Basbug reminded his audience of the military's past history in protecting Ataturk's secular republic and asserted the right of the armed forces to "continue to take sides in protecting the nation-state, the unitary state and the secular state."

¶2. (C) Press reports have suggested the statement represents a shift to a sharper, more assertive, rhetoric, but this is not a new assertion for Basbug. During the August 26 Change-of-Command ceremony, when he left his command of the First Army in Istanbul to succeed the current CHOD GEN Buyukanit as the Land Forces Commander and become the second highest-ranking military official, Basbug made the same assertion. In his acceptance speech, Basbug had sought to educate his audience on the important transformation the country made away from a religious state when the Republic was first born and said that the Turkish Armed Forces "have always been involved in preserving the nation-state, the unitary state, and the secular state, and will continue to do so." Expressing views on these subjects -- and sharing them with the public -- is a duty of the military, he said. In January 2005, while Deputy CHOD, Basbug gave a televised speech in which he stated that "as long as the fundamentalist and separatist movements continue to exist, it will always be the priority concern of the Turkish Armed Forces to combat them."

¶3. (C) Basbug's speech comes a month ahead of the EU's next progress report on Turkey, expected on November 8, and follows on the heels of criticism by European Commission head Hans Jorg Kretschmer. During a September 24 visit to Ankara, Kretschmer criticized the military's penchant for expressing its views "on almost every aspect of public life," including education and religion, and asserted that the biggest challenge for Turkey would be to "create stable institutions able to deliver services, including security, to the citizens of the country in a way that respects democratic principles."

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Basbug's speech contained elements that he and other military officials have said previously on numerous occasions. The timing of the speech, however, could suggest

that the military is taking advantage of the growing anti-EU sentiment to reassert its historic role as protector of the secular state at a time when the government is seeking to increase its profile within the Muslim world and the PKK terrorist group has significantly stepped up attacks, heightening the public's sense of insecurity. Those with whom we've spoken in academic and NGO circles argue that the military views its role solely in the context of ensuring the security of the Turkish state, but that its definition of what constitutes a security issue is very broad. END COMMENT.

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